

## The Jedi Warrior Bond - Edges of Darkness

by GM

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Summary: Jedi Warrior Bond series - Dark Magic, Dark Force -- can the Warrior Bond between Jinn and Kenobi combat this evil?

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Jedi Warrior Bond series

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Edges of Darkness

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By

GM

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The Jedi team accompanies Senator Valorum to Xerilum for negotiations on mineral rights. A coup, a Dark magic, and the Jedi Bond come together to test the strength and Fate of Qui-Gon and seventeen-year-old Obi-Wan.

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Rated -- PG -- intensity, violence, hurt/comfort -- ANGST --  
plot-lite

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Not connected with the JA series.

The Canon according to Lucas -- based on the universe provided in the movie Star Wars: The Phantom Menace. All characters copyrights and legal details belong to George Lucas -- the highest Master Jedi of all.

**\*\*ORDER OF STORIES IN \_JEDI WARRIOR BOND\_ SERIES:\*\***

**\*\* \*\***

. . . every saga has a beginning . . .

Secrets

The Path of Bonding

Connecting

Sanctuary

The Heart of Existence

Edges of Darkness

The Sorcerer and the Apprentice

Shadow on the Warrior Path

Bridge Over Troubled Water

Always

The Last Hope

The End of the Warrior Path

**\* \* \***

><p><p>

"Now, just a few more details before we set down." Senator Valorum turned from the veiwwport to address the two Jedi seated at the conference table. Behind the politician, the hazy, grey/blue mist of the planet Xerilum floated in the depths of space. "I'm afraid we haven't really had time for a history lesson."

"No. The current affairs seemed complicated enough." Obi-Wan's delivery was dry and slightly ironic.

Qui-Gon shot him an elevated eyebrow, a silent comment that at least HE picked up on that wry tone of voice and that it should not be repeated. They may not like the politics, but much of their job was

related to governmental trivia and Senator Valorum at least deserved their respect.

For the most part they had spent the two days of travel in this very plushly furnished room aboard the senate transport, hashing over the political climate of Xerilum. A simple clan system of government had evolved into a complex structure of rules and regulation that were mind-numbing in both number and trivia. Getting down to the basics, three clans held power on Xerilum the prominent and most powerful clan owning the majority of rights to the beryllium mines. The Republic wanted to mine some of the energizing mineral and the Xer clan agreed to open negotiations. The Senate had insisted on Jedi at the talks and Xer's chieftain reluctantly agreed.

"You will be entering a situation that is -- precarious to say the least." Valorum continued without taking much notice in Obi-Wan Kenobi , or either Jedi for that matter. "Xer's chief, Xor, does not -- uh -- respect the Jedi order." At this the lean, tall senator stretched the high, brocaded collar away from his neck, as if it was suddenly too tight or warm. "He looks on the Jedi as being -- uh -- weak. It is only at my insistence that you are here."

Obi-Wan exchanged a surprised glance with his placid Master. Qui-Gon seemed amused and Kenobi smirked. Sometimes it was hard to restrain a little bit of arrogance at their powers in the Force. If some of these backward planets even knew . . . .

—

'Of what, my Padawan?'

—

The silent, dry comment brought a smile to his face. Through their Jedi bond their mental communications were as solid as voice exchanges. They knew each other so well they didn't even need the bond.

"Is something amusing you, Apprentice -- uh --"

"Kenobi, sir." The young man straightened in his chair. "Not at all."

Looking at the senator with studious intent, the young Jedi sent a repost to his elder. \_'Master, you receive a malicious delight in getting me into trouble.'\_

—

'Never malicious, my young one.'

—

In his mind, Obi-Wan smiled at that\_. 'I will be eighteen standard years soon, my Master. Hardly young anymore.'\_

—

'Are you trying to make me feel old?'

'Whatever, Master.'

'Cheeky youth.'

—

Valorum paced, clearing his throat, a sign there was more disturbing news. "Now, this is very serious gentlemen. Especially you must mind your protocol to the letter. And Apprentice -- uh -- "

"Kenobi, sir."

"Yes. You must be mindful of your Master's lead. Do not talk or initiate any action with anyone for any reason!"

The unique mixture of curiosity, irritation and concern flashed over to Obi-Wan with amazing clarity. The expression on Jinn's face never flickered, but through their mental link the instant worry was shouting within the older Jedi. He was not known as a master for nothing. He could match inscrutable manners with any one in the galaxy.

"What do you mean, Senator?"

"Oh, well, the clans favor the strong, you know. Apprentices -- assistants -- that kind of station in life means -- uh -- little to them. That is why I didn't bring my assistant -- uh -- I brought you -- uh -- two."

Qui-Gon's jaw tightened and he glared icy-blue daggers at the politician. "And why did you not inform us of this? I have a young Padawan with me. What kind of danger will he face? He is my responsibility as much as this mission!" His eyes narrowed. \_'More,'\_ he finished silently.

Kenobi valiantly kept his anger and affront from the Senator, but not his Master. \_'Who does he think he is?'\_

— —

"Oh," the senator grimaced. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Any more than those old, suppositious legends about Xerilum."

This news flash got Obi-Wan's attention. "What legends?"

"The Dark magic." He looked away from Qui-Gon's harder glare and addressed the younger man. "You know, witches and Dark forces and evil, but they are just old tales. We're too advanced to believe in that sort of nonsense."

Obi-Wan felt the internal sigh of foreboding from his Master. Suddenly they both had a bad feeling about the mission.

Valorum left and Kenobi cocked an eyebrow. "Well, remember that's what you used to think about the Warrior Bond. Myth and old superstitions."

Jinn did not respond to the light, teasing tone. "We know the truth of that legend. I trust it will be useful against these ominous mystic fables."

Eyes alight with youthful confidence, Kenobi assured, "The Warrior Bond will always defeat the Darkness, Master."

Not superstitious, Jinn still inwardly winced at the self-satisfied, smug statement. Unable to deny the Bond had brought them both back from death's door, he did not want to tempt Fate.

Settling into the plush sofa with a sigh, Jinn suggested they practice their low-Force exercises. The younger man scowled and the elder did not need to see the scrunched face to feel the dismay. In long-suffering, Jinn covered his eyes with a hand.

"What is your greatest imbalance, my dear Padawan?"

"My humility?"

Without a flick or a twitch, Jinn Force-sent a pillow flying at his pupil. He cleared his throat.

"My impatience and impulsiveness, Master?"

"Quite so. Now, let us begin." Without preamble he used his powers to detach Obi-Wan's sabre hilt from his belt, sending the silver handle across the table to the far edge.

"Master." The tone was mock indignation. "That is unfair. A Jedi should never be without his lightsabre."

"Then I suggest you retrieve it."

The exercise was one they had refined and practiced for years. Since one of their early missions when they encountered anti-Force weapons [Jedi Warrior Bond 2], Qui-Gon wanted them to be prepared for battles where they could not use the extent of their powers. Dark Magic was largely unknown in the galaxy, but the Dark Side was a very tangible reality. This routine was designed for them to operate singly or as a team, without using a level of the Force that would be detectable to other Force-sensitives, or that would be inhibited by weapons, such as the sonic blast bombs that had disabled them, nearly fatally, many years before.

Without closing his eyes or giving any outward indication of concentration, Kenobi strove to move the lightsabre toward him. Inwardly he worked for a low, subtle level of the Force to accomplish his objective, while not being detected by Jinn. To play fair, Qui-Gon closed down his natural perception of his apprentice's energy.

Strolling behind the younger man, Jinn suddenly grabbed the back of the chair and threw it backward. Kenobi was prepared for an action of some kind and somersaulted over his mentor, landing on his feet and keeping away from the taller, broader man. This was their game, physical and mental keep-away, while Obi-Wan still worked on edging his sabre into his hand. Dancing around the room, Kenobi used the furniture, the bulkheads, and the table, to spring and leap, staying clear of Qui-Gon.

The silver hilt was nearly at the edge of the table, but Jinn effectively blocked the path. Obi-Wan dove to the left and pulled the

sabre toward him. Jinn's hand swept by and caught the hilt without the Force, but was instantly tackled by his apprentice.

"Your impatience --"

"I know, I know," Obi-Wan admitted, still wrestling to regain his sabre.

Easily outmatched without using the Force, Obi-Wan persisted trying to tussle to an advantage and regain possession of his weapon. Again, he made a quick move, emphasized by the Force, and Qui-Gon somehow managed to twist him over onto his stomach, the older man's elbow in his spine.

In desperation Obi-Wan turned to his side in distraction, nudging the hilt with the Force. From the amused glitter in Qui-Gon's blue eyes, just inches from his, the younger Jedi knew he had failed in wily finesse.

For a moment their gaze held, then Kenobi was overwhelmed with the hilarity of the moment. A giggle rose in his chest and burbled out before he could stop. Contagiously, the laughter infected the Master and he laughed, rolling over on his back, flipping the sabre into the air. Obi-Wan, now giggling so hard he couldn't stop, barely caught the hilt before it hit him on the head.

The disapproving clearing of a throat sobered them both. With unique, remarkable ease and grace for a large man, the Master jumped to his feet. Weak from laughter, Kenobi's stand lacked any elegance whatsoever.

"Senator Valorum." Jinn's voice sounded serene and even, as if wrestling on the floor was the most foreign thing in his nature.

The apprentice didn't bother to say anything since he was still catching his breath. He managed a civil nod. His attention to decorum didn't matter because, as usual, Valorum ignored him and addressed the elder Jedi.

"Master Jinn, we are about to land."

Smooth, suave, every particle an innate diplomat, Jinn merely nodded. "Very well."

Without much of a pause Valorum continued, disdainful of the unusual antics of the Jedi. "Now, Master Qui-Gon, this behavior will not do. You must be careful to show no relationship except the strict servant and master association with your apprentice." His voice was snooty, as if addressing a child. "If they think you accept a weaker servant as an equal, it will jeopardize the mission and could endanger -- well, most likely your apprentice would be singled out because of his youth and weakness. I've heard terrible stories of their treatment of underlings and servants. I don't think you'll want to risk that. Not that I believe in Black Magic, of course, but some of the ceremonies sound dreadful."

"Why was none of this in your briefing to the Jedi Council?" Adept at dealing with the high and mighty, Jinn managed to convey his contempt and ire without losing an edge of civility. The unruffled tone remained, but there was an edge to the blue eyes, darkened with

annoyance. "We are Jedi, Senator. We will conduct ourselves accordingly. My apprentice is not my servant and I will not present him as such. If they do not understand the function of a Padawan learner, then they are about to be educated."

In moments like these, Obi-Wan could not be prouder of his magnificent Master. Certainly he had the most amazing mentor in the entire galaxy. No wonder the experienced Jedi was specifically requested for this difficult and delicate negotiation. More and more the Senate asked for Jinn in precarious matters of galactic import. The warmth transmitted to his Master and in return he felt the gracious flick of gratitude.

"No, it will not do," Valorum insisted coolly. "You will treat your Padawan as dictated by the Chief. If he accepts -- uh -- him -- fine. If there is any conflict whatsoever you are to defer to the ruler. These negotiations are critical! Vital! Protocol must be obeyed. Is that understood?"

The composed equanimity of the tone belayed the fire in the blue eyes. "Yes, Senator."

"Very well, please prepare for departure."

After Valorum left Jinn stood still, the only movement being the clenching of his fists. Obi-Wan struggled to find something mature and comforting to say as opposed to his usual biting sarcasm, which would not be of any help to his Master now. Qui-Gon was at least as unhappy about this situation as he was, perhaps more.

With a sigh Jinn turned, the irritation in his gaze now diminished to frustration. "Well, my dear Padawan, it seems our patience will be greatly taxed on our visit to this planet."

He couldn't resist the natural banter. "I am happy to be in such honored company."

Smirking, Jinn last action of undignified affection was to ruffle his Padawan's short-cropped hair. The behavior was probably too casual for a Master and a nearly eighteen year old apprentice. But it was still acceptable to a father and a mischievous son.

"As I am, my Padawan. Let's just remember to be wary during our stay here."

----

As they hovered over the streets of Xer, escorted by Xor's personal guards, the Jedi kept their faces blandly neutral. Between them, revulsion and disgust bounced as they passed scene after scene of poverty and brutality. The clans seemed to spend a great deal of their wealth on ostentatious uniforms, glittering palaces and the latest models in speeder transports. Little seemed left over to clothe and feed the common workers who lived in the hovels below.

—

'You sense it.'

'Yes, Master. Beyond the despair and anger, there is a distinct evil presence here.'

—

\_'Almost --'\_ Confusion filtered through their link. "Almost familiar."

The planet seemed a dichotomy; a small portion of rich, a larger portion of poor who did not share in many benefits resulting in the narrow availability of technology. Jinn wondered how entering the Republic would benefit those poor people below. There were many poverty-stricken planets in the Republic. He was enough of a realist to know that would make little difference. The minerals here would benefit many -- and bulge many pockets in the galaxy. That was not his job to judge. He was asked to help negotiate and he would focus on that. With difficulty he would push his humanity and compassion behind the shields of responsibility.

When the comfortable transport touched down outside a large and ornate palace, Qui-Gon emerged just after the guards, scanning the area with astute scrutiny. The senator came next, followed by Obi-Wan. A few steps away from the craft some children gathered for a look at the dignitaries. In the shoving and positioning, a dirty, scruffy little girl was pushed to her knees and trampled. Qui-Gon moved to help her and Valorum grabbed onto his shoulder.

"Remember, the weak are not tolerated here," he whispered urgently. "You must not be seen helping anyone who appears weak!"

Jinn hesitated, weighing the advice, the mission, against his innate compassion. It was a moot point. The little girl raised herself from the dirt, brushed off her legs and shoved back at the big boy who had pushed her down. When the bigger, stronger boy moved to retaliate, Qui-Gon gave a subtle nod of his head and the little girl's push sent the boy tumbling into a somersault.

Obi-Wan smiled at her amazement. The group continued, but soon Kenobi noticed a tagalong at his side. Jinn must have sensed her too, for he glanced back and smiled at the smeared face with beaming eyes. He dropped back and joined Obi-Wan, leaning down to address the child next to the apprentice.

"Hello."

Kenobi sighed. "Master," he whispered, annoyed, "You're not going to adopt another lost cause, are you?" The long suffering was met with an enigmatic smile.

"I adopted you, didn't I?"

The Padawan rolled his eyes. "Very funny."

"Are you a king?" the little girl asked of the giant man with the long, flowing hair.

"No, I am a Jedi Knight."

The confusion clear on her face, she studied him. "You are very big. Does that make you strong?"



"Sometimes." Glancing at the guards and the senator, Jinn slowed and crouched down to eye level with the urchin. "Do you want to know a secret about being strong?" She nodded. "Being strong is not as important as being clever. When someone bigger than you gives you trouble, if you are smarter than they are, you can defeat them." He came to his feet and ruffled the hair on his apprentice's head. "Otherwise my Padawan would not be able to defeat me."

Stoically, Kenobi refrained from giving away the secret that he almost never defeated his Master at anything. But he was smart enough to know this was a hypothetical example and not a lesson based on fact.

"Your what?" She examined Obi-Wan. "Is he your servant?"

"No, he is my Padawan. My --" he glanced at the young man who was now an adult, but would always be his boy in his eyes. "My son."

"And he is as strong as you?"

Meeting the blue/green eyes of his almost eighteen year old apprentice, he allowed the pride and honor a rare moment of public acknowledgement. "Sometimes he is even stronger."

Obi-Wan gave a slight bow and smile to his Master, accepting the compliment graciously. "Many times," he said quietly to the girl, while he kept his eyes on Jinn, "he teaches me about strength."

The guards returned abruptly and interrupted the moment. Valorum tapped his foot impatiently, wondering what the delay was. Qui-Gon gave a wink to the little girl and they started up the broad steps of the palace.

Numerous workers slaved to keep the glittering walls of the huge edifice clean. No small feat in the grey, mucky, dusty world devoted to mining. As they walked the Jedi surreptitiously watched, studied and learned. The commoners, the guards, the workers, all had a place in the scheme of things and underneath it all ran an undercurrent of evil.

—

'It grows Darker as we approach, Master.'

"Yes. Be mindful of Valorum's warnings, Obi-Wan. Conduct yourself carefully, please.'

'Always.'

—

The ironic remark hardly assured the knowing Master, who well understood Kenobi's nature for adventure and risk.

—

'We must keep our communications very subtle, my Padawan. I am -- uncertain -- of the source of this Dark power.'

—

The self-apprehension was apparent in the telepathy\_. 'I hope I am ready, Master.'\_

—

'You have never failed me, Obi-Wan. Just be wary. Let the Force guide you, but in a whisper.'

—

The inner voice dropped to a trace, a susurrations\_. 'I will.'\_

— —

Pleased, Jinn gave a subtle nod of approval to his apprentice.

Walking down several empty halls, their boots clicked on the polished floor. No sign of workers, only guards in this area. Obviously the chief liked to be reminded of his power, not his subjects. Red-coated sentinels opened two doors at the end of the hall. An ornate and relatively clean room, with cushioned sofas and chairs and a large throne-type settee adorned the large area. A burly, bearded Humanoid sat on the throne and glared at them with squinting eyes.

Behind and to the side of the Chief, just off the throne dais, was an old, withered woman in purple robes. She stared at them with watery eyes. Dark powers emanated from her. Both Jedi gave her a quick assessment, then focused on the Chief.

At a very subtle level, Qui-Gon sent a quick thought to his apprentice. The message was little more than a gentle brush against his senses. \_'Use no show of Force here, Padawan until we understand her powers.'\_

— —

\_ 'Yes, Master.' \_The wry sarcasm was evident in the thoughts.

—

'Snobbishness hardly becomes you, Padawan. Especially one who believes in such mystic phenomenon as the Warrior Bond.'

—

The Chief gave a small greeting gesture with his hand. "Ah, Senator Valorum."

The politician gave a slight bow of his head. "I am so pleased to meet you, Chief Xor. Allow me to introduce to you Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn who will assist me in these negotiations. And his apprentice Kenobi. We are so --"

When the senator made the specific titles clear, Qui-Gon felt a tremor of abhorrence emanate from the large chief. The man's narrow eyes scrutinized him, then his Padawan, then the senator.

"You dare bring a servant here!"

Jinn stepped forward. "This is my apprentice. He assists me --"

The chief sniffed. "We have agreed to you, Jedi, because the Republic insists you be here. We have no respect for Jedi because you do not use the potential of your power, which makes you weak. We will allow **\*\*you\*\***. And the senator. We do not allow servants into the same room as the Chief!"

"He is no servant." The voice was dangerously calm and level but there was an edge that suffered no more intolerance. "He is a Jedi."

Valorum, ever the politician, held up his hand to the chief. "One moment, please, Chief." He leaned close to Jinn, completely ignoring Kenobi. Again. "Master Qui-Gon, let's not quibble over semantics before the negotiations! Your apprentice is not needed or welcomed here."

Teeth clenched, then relaxed as Jinn drew in a breath and released it. "Either he accepts Jedi authority and gives us the respect we deserve, or we lose the first round, Senator. Compromise on respect and you lose. Compromise somewhere else."

The Chief gave an impatient snort.

Valorum turned his attention back to the ruler. "So sorry, Chief Xor. Apprentice -- uh -- Kenobi will be leaving now. Where is it acceptable for him to wait?"

—

'Master?'

—

\_'Calm -- my Padawan.'\_ His own turbulent emotions -- ire, impatience and apprehension surged along with the cliché advice. \_'We must play along for now. I can do nothing to show weakness here.'\_

—

'I understand.'

'Pay attention. Stay alert. If there is trouble let me know.'

'Yes, Master.'

—

Xor waved to one of the guards. "Take him to the servant's mess." The matter dismissed, he stared at Valorum. "You may start your presentation, Senator."

As Obi-Wan was escorted out, Qui-Gon neither moved, nor betrayed anything on his glacial features. His mind, however, tracked his Padawan's attempt at calmness with some amusement. After a few minutes, assured his young friend was safe, he turned more complete

attention to the talks.

---

In his many travels and years with his Master, Obi-Wan had seen some disgusting sights, lived in revolting places and eaten things he had nightmares about for weeks. The kitchens of Xor's palace were as abhorrent as he had ever experienced. Thin, long-legged canine-type creatures roamed the large rooms sniffing out scraps. Young children in filthy clothes worked to clean and chop food, fetch utensils and other jobs.

To his dismay, his guard escort reported he was there to work while his Master was attending to business. Apparently this happened all the time. Cheap labor, Obi-Wan despaired, as he was assigned to clean some roots with two children. Keeping in mind his Master's orders, he sat on a stool and started his menial task without complaint.

Taken as a common worker, he was able to glean tremendous amounts of local information. What he heard worried him. Clan Xor was hanging onto control by just a thin thread. The kitchen staff gossiped that food was less plentiful and varied, or expensive. Clan Xala, from the hills, had control of several mines and most of the food sources on the planet. Xor treated his people badly, spent too much money on frills and debauchery and the people hated him for it. If Xala moved against Xor, the people back the chief from the hills. Most of them. The rest --

The root dropped from Obi-Wan's hand as his whole body went cold. A Force of evil, so strong it was numbing, swept across his senses and chilled his nerves. Shivering, he instantly, subconsciously, connected with his Master.

—

'Darkness, Master! Be --'

—

The Presence was so black and complete in it's obscure depths Kenobi's vision seemed to cloud. It was a Force affect and he knew it. Like a cloak covering the area, he was shrouded in the Dark side of the Force. Something so powerful he felt closed off from everything physical and almost everything telepathic. He could still feel Qui-Gon's bond, but it was dampened.

Suddenly the door crashed open. Children screamed, creatures yelped, adults shouted. Then the room filled with blaster fire. Instinctively his lightsabre was in his hands and he repelled the fire coming his way, but with clumsy and slow moves. Some outside Force was drowning his ability to connect with his own Force. Edges of Darkness were overwhelming his Light.

Warn Qui-Gon, warn his Master --

—

'Master! Attack --'

—

A piece of his mind ripped apart and he clutched at his head, dizzy and unfocused. A blaster bolt shot into his arm, throwing him into the wall and his sabre flung away. Using what Force he could call, he summoned it back into his hand and backed into a hallway, mostly succeeding in warding off the fire.

—

'Master!'

—

Another bolt seared into his side and he folded, again straining within the Force to gather his strength and will around him. Then the blackness grew close enough for him to touch and he could no longer move, no longer send his thoughts -- no longer feel his bond with Qui-Gon. That was more frightening than the engulfing blackness.

----

"We are under attack!" Jinn leaped up from his comfortable chair and drew his sabre. A dangerous stunt while surrounded by nervous guards loyal to their leader. "The palace is under attack!"

Xor was at least smart enough not to question such bold conviction. Perhaps it was Qui-Gon's surge of the Force that lent potency to his warning. Xor didn't even question his source, but ordered the guards to defense positions. On hand-held communicators the guards called their fellows to arms and the doors were sealed. Then Xor turned to the old witch in the corner. Slowly she nodded her head.

"Xala attacks." She stared at Jinn. "Your magic is skilled. It might be strong enough to save you." Her old, watery eyes turned to her chief. "Xala has heavy energy with him. A dreadful warlock. They may be mightier magic than mine."

The conversation was noted with partial attention. Even as Qui-Gon closed ranks by Xor and Valorum, he reached out through his link to find his distraught apprentice. He had clearly felt the surprise, the alarm, and the fright of his young friend.

—

'Obi-Wan!'

—

While he still felt their Bond, he also sensed it decrease? No, diminish in power. With that sensation the strangling clutch of foreboding in his throat tightened. Beyond the familiar and ever-present sense of his apprentice, was the aspect of horror cloaking Obi-Wan and approaching this room.

—

\_'Obi-Wan hold onto the Force! Hold to our Bond!\_' his mind screamed. There was no responding reply. The last vestige of Warrior tie faded into nothingness. \_'Obi-Wan!\_' His heart skipped a beat at the

silence in his thoughts.

Something had not killed or taken his Padawan, some power had extinguished his apprentice's Force. Not killed him -- he would have known that -- but subdued the Padawan's senses. If Obi-Wan was trying to contact him, the subtle level of energy was too weak for Jinn to receive. Opposingly, the Master could not broadcast more of his desperate entreaties to his pupil for fear of them being sensed by whoever was responsible for this inky void.

Then Jinn felt the wave of Blackness approaching. As much as he longed for his primary duty to be the safety of his Padawan, his responsibility was to protect Valorum and the Chief.

"We must leave."

He didn't wait for Xor or the witch to add confirmation to the order. Understanding the urgency Xor moved to the far end of the room. The closest guards formed a protective perimeter around them. The witch did not move. When he glanced at her, she met his gaze.

"I can not fight anymore. The Darkness is too black."

Sensing immediate danger Qui-Gon urged them to make haste with the escape. Before they could reach the end of the room the wall near the double doors blasted with a tremendous implosion. The concussion sent nearly everyone to the floor. Jinn grabbed Valorum and Xor and moved them to the area behind the throne dais. Using the Force, Jinn urged the hidden escape route, wherever and whatever that was, to respond. A flush panel on the wall opened and the dignitaries, the Jedi and a handful of guards were sealed into a long corridor. With the Force Qui-Gon melted the secret lever, sealing that entrance. Knowing it was made of nutro alloys, he felt confident they just bought themselves some time and safety.

"Where does this lead?"

"To my underground control center. And a hidden port." Xor snarled in anger. "If worst comes to worst we can escape this planet. But I don't want to leave everything behind, Jedi."

Qui-Gon's heavy heart could only agree. Escape was the last option he wanted to employ. How could he flee and leave his Padawan behind? Narrowed blue ice-eyes glared at Valorum. His bad judgement, his withholding information had put Obi-Wan in the center of a desperate, dangerous civil war. Now those questionable politics might force Jinn to flee the planet with the Senator -- protecting the man whom might be responsible for his apprentice's death.

"You're supposed to protect me! You want the beryllium, don't you? Xala will not take prisoners. They will kill us more painfully than you've ever thought possible. Believe me, you'd rather kill yourself than be captured."

Jinn could hardly speak through his tight, emotion-knotted throat. "I can not win a civil war for you, Chief. I can only do what is possible to protect you."

----

Since he never passed out completely he quickly came back to his senses. The soldiers who had fired on him were already gone, hastily speeding through the palace. As the kitchen filled with new soldiers, Kenobi sublimated what was left of his Force powers. That meant he could not use any Force to heal the searing wounds in his side or his arm, nor could he even dull the pain without the risk of detection. Biting his lip against the wounds he crawled to the wall.

To the brutal, armored men who now crashed into the room he was just another peasant. If they were more observant they would have seen his robe was plain, but in good condition. He himself should have presented a threat -- a young, trim, fit man -- but he never looked directly at them and allowed himself to be shuffled and herded to the wall by the back door.

Using his Force acuity at it's lowest possible level he assessed everything and everyone. No detail went unnoticed. A commotion in the yard alerted him and his sense of foreboding increased alarmingly. Drawing the robes around his body, effectively hiding his lightsabre, he glanced sideways at the approaching men. One was a tall, broad man in rough clothes, the subservient soldiers called him Xala. With him was a shorter man in a dark cape with no hood, addressed as Xxir. A third, figure was completely non-descript, cloaked by a black, hooded robe.

Shutting down any trace of the Force, he glanced only occasionally at the leaders. The black-robed man chilled him, emanating waves of Darkness. As Xala walked to the kitchen door he kicked a dead body out of the way. It was the limp form of the little girl Qui-Gon had befriended. Swallowing hard, Kenobi fought back the tears stinging his eyes. He had seen tragedy and heartache before, but gratuitous death always sliced him to the core.

"Where is Xor?"

Xxir, cruel looking, with slicked back, dark hair stood next to Xala. The hooded man stayed outside and remote from anyone else.

One of the soldiers who had been in the kitchen responded. "In his throne room, sir." He bowed to both Xala and the other man. "And the witch is said to be with them, Warlock Xxir."

The hooded man whispered something to the leader and Xxir. "The off worlders?"

"With him."

"Kill them. We want no interference. We are keeping the beryllium mines to ourselves and not sharing with the Republic. Leave no trace of the off worlders."

Controlling his panic, Obi-Wan kept his eyes to the floor. Without the Force to help calm and center his raging emotions, he had to clench his fists and jaw to hold back the trembling. Xala and the soldiers left, entering the main rooms of the palace. The black hooded man slinked away, his robe sweeping behind him like a cloud of terror. The remaining soldiers ordered the kitchen staff back to work. Within minutes Obi-Wan slipped out the door and crept along the outside wall of the palace. He held his injured arm to his aching side, trying to ignore the scrape of rough cloth on exposed, burned

skin.

Xala's tattered soldiers were in charge. There were not too many guarding the palace. Most were dealing with killing Xor's guards. Apparently these people really did not take prisoners. A sobering thought, he reminded himself as he found a niche to hide in while he studied the lay out. With a tiny sliver of the Force he tested the area. No immediate threat. The Dark presence seemed vanished along with the black robed stranger. And of Qui-Gon he could feel nothing.

That was his fault. He had shut down too completely and now he could not contact his Master. Closing his eyes he concentrated, striving to establish that delicate fragment of Bond they always shared. Just a whisper, enough to warn Jinn of the impending attack.

—

'Master.'

'Obi-Wan.'

—

The faint, calming voice in his head warmed his heart. \_'They are coming after you. Beware.'\_

— —

\_ 'You, too.' \_ Qui-Gon initiated the break.

Had Xala's forces reached the throne room? Obi-Wan felt a prickle of Darkness and again shut down all remnants of the Force. Was it the hooded man? Deep in the shadows of his corner, Kenobi saw the hooded man and Xxir walking with several of Xala's soldiers. They were headed toward some ships. Once they were out of sight Obi-Wan continued along the wall. He had briefly sensed an opening ahead and now using only his tactile skills and normal six senses, he crept into a hallway.

Down the corridor he could hear explosions and blasters. Hastening his pace he quelled his frenzied nerves, ignoring the pain shooting through his wounded body. Rounding a corner he skidded to a halt. The soldiers were in the throne room!

"There's a hidden panel here, Xala, Chief!"

Edging closer, he saw the men blasting away at a wall behind the throne. On the floor by the huge chair was the old witch's body. Gulping, Kenobi knew there was no hope for his Master and the others if they were caught in the escape tunnel. Risking a message, he urgently called to Qui-Gon.

—

'Master, they are coming for you! Can you escape?'

—



\_'In a few minutes we will be at a hidden port. We can -- ' \_a stab of heart-wrenching pain came clearly through the connection that was now deepening despite Obi-Wan's best efforts at shallowness. His Master was suffering incredible anguish and Obi-Wan knew why before the words came into his mind.\_ 'There is a ship waiting. Chief Xor and Valorum wish to -- escape.'\_

—

'Go, Master. I will buy you whatever time I can.'

'I am the only pilot. You understand --'

'Yes. Please, go.'

'I can not leave you --'

—

His own eyes burned with tears at the knowledge that he would in all likelihood die within the next few minutes. If it would save his Master he would accept that as an honorable fate.\_ 'I would do anything to save you. May the Force be with you, Master.' \_

—

'No -- '

—

\_'Would you abandon your duty, Master?'\_ A blast from the throne room shook the hall. A ripple in the Dark Side tinged at his senses. \_'I must go now, Master. There is Darkness coming! Leave now!'\_

--

There was no more time to think, to say everything in their hearts -- to say good-bye -- there was only just time to act. Brutally Kenobi shut down any vestiges of his Bond with his Master. Drawing his lightsabre he swept into the room. He had never fought blind -- without the total reliance on the Force. It was like a clumsy march instead of the graceful ballet he was used to, but he could not risk any element of his Force-Bond giving away the position of his Master. His lack of training in the subtleties of the shallow-Force exercises could endanger Qui-Gon. The Warrior Bond had saved their lives many times before, now it was a risk and he would not allow it to jeopardize his Master.

Into the room, sabre flashing, he cut down three soldiers before they knew what hit them. Xala and six others turned and fired. By instinct, or some latent vestige of the Force, he slashed away the bolts, advancing on their position. Closer and closer he moved, deflecting bolts all around him. A few slipped by and sliced through his tunic, a few burning his skin, one taking a chunk out of his already injured arm, but he did not slow, did not allow it to distract him from his goal. Running on cold, focused energy -- neither Light or Dark -- he wielded the sword like a wand of death. Two more soldiers down. If he could not call on the Force, he had his natural, athletic skills, years of innate talent, and the memory of fighting side by side with his Master. That memory alone sustained

him as he cut down the last of the opponents.

Despite his closure his Master knew his mind better than he did. One last flicker of warmth and comfort slipped through his defenses. Qui-Gon.

—

'We are free of the planet, my Padawan. My heart stays with you. Always, my son.'

—

Xala's blaster was hot from pumping energy. At last a final bolt seared toward him and Obi-Wan bounced it back. The surge plowed into Xala's chest. The big man fell to the floor. Sensing something behind him, Obi-Wan turned, the impression of a black wisp blurred at the corner of his eye. Suddenly he was propelled into the air, slamming against the wall. As he slid to the floor everything went black.

----

At the controls of the small transport, Qui-Gon's hands shook. Blinking back the stinging tears in his eyes, only one drop slid down his cheek. He allowed it to drip off the end of his mustache. A warning light indicated a ship following and he adjusted, preparing quickly to jump to hyperspace, the cockpit windows alight with the blurred stars as they folded into super-light speed. Whoever was following them was lost now. He would leave hyperspace only at the immediate airspace of Coruscant, with no chance of anyone following them. All aboard were safe. Normally the jump caused his heart to thrill at the speed and excitement. This time his heart was broken.

The last vestige of the Warrior Bond had not been much of a comfort. His brave apprentice had, typically, willingly sacrificed himself for the mission. \_'For you, Jinn, you old fool,'\_ he brutally reminded himself. Enough of their Bond remained in that last instant to transmit the devotion, the love, and the adulation his Padawan insisted on bestowing upon him.

Then Obi-Wan had shut down all Force energy. It left Qui-Gon with an utter loneliness that was stark and arid in his soul. Was this what it was like to lose a part of yourself? He had thought it hurt to lose an apprentice to the Dark Side. At the physical, emotional anguish coursing his insides he knew a fresh definition of pain. Yes, he had suffered before when he thought he was losing Obi-Wan. When death seemed closer than life he had ached. But this aloneness, without the connection, without their unique Bond was devastating. A few times he had lost the inner touch with his Padawan, but never like this. Never when his apprentice shut down and left him.

—

'Who is the one that left?'

—

The accusation left him cold and numb. So many years ago when he

resisted taking a Padawan again, he'd told Yoda he feared another betrayal. [Jedi Warrior Bond 1]

—

"If Master you became to a student, betray him would you? Think you must young Kenobi will betray you."

"I don't want to take the risk." "

—

The tears threatened to spill again as he remembered the foolish conversation with Yoda. **\*\*\_HE -- Jinn\_\*\*** -- had been afraid of betrayal! Who was the one abandoning his Padawan to certain death? Who was the one to submit to sacrifice? Xor had made it clear that Chieftains did not take prisoners. What would they do to a boy -- a not-yet-eighteen year old boy -- who opposed them single-handed? Aloud he groaned, the pain becoming too great, the tears cascading down the lines of his face, catching in his short, trim beard.

—

'Fight, my Padawan. Like you have never battled before. Save yourself.'

—

He would finish his damnable mission, see his passengers safely to Coruscant. Then he would return to reclaim the body of his Padawan. And always, as long as he lived, would he remember the valiant son that was his for so short a time. For as long as he could not forgive himself, he would remember the sacrifice of his brave Jedi.

---

Ki-Adi-Mundi stood tall and serene in the small office adjacent to the Jedi Council chamber. There was no time to request an emergency session of the Council, and most members were asleep at this time, deep in the night cycle of Coruscant. Mundi, with an extended skull and complex brain needed less sleep than most beings. From the paradisiacal Cerea, he was a calm, peaceful being by nature. Right now his tranquility was driving a Human Jedi Master crazy.

"I must have a transport now." Jinn strove for even temperament, but easily heard the edge to his voice, the strain in the tone. It was remarkable that he was not pacing, slamming fists and feet into walls as he tried to outwait the Council member. Contrary to popular belief, Jedi were not always controlled and serene. Particularly certain rebellious Human Jedi Masters whose Padawans were in mortal peril. "Every minute longer could mean Obi-Wan's death!"

The Council had adjourned late and Mundi was the only one available to hear his dreadful story of escape and abandonment. The guilt over leaving the planet was clear and painfully colored his brief report with urgency.

"Your Padawan knew the risk and accepted his Fate, Master Jinn. There

is no shame in this."

"He could still be alive."

"From what I know of the Xerilum people that is unlikely."

"But possible." He nearly growled. "I have to go back and find out."

The tall, narrow head shook gently from side to side, an oddly Human gesture. "In the midst of civil war send one Jedi? One is already lost. We can not afford to lose you as well, Master Jinn. Your request for a ship and travel clearance is denied."

"I left my Padawan -- "

"I am sorry." His face hardly changed expression. "I understand it is a terrible loss when an apprentice is killed. We can only turn to the Force and seek solace in such times of crisis."

Qui-Gon's body went cold. Mundi had never been a Master, never known the responsibility and love a Master felt for a Padawan. How could he understand the guilt and revulsion that swirled inside Jinn at his betrayal? The Force, meditation, old clichés answers -- nothing would assuage his guilt and pain. If there was one chance in a million that Obi-Wan still lived he would take it. If nothing else, he owed his valiant Padawan the honor of a Jedi burial pyre, not a common ditch on some foreign and hostile world. Many Jedi -- too many in the last few years -- died far from their center of the Temple, destroyed without reverence. An honored burial was meant mostly for those left behind. It was the only thing left that he could offer for the bravery and sacrifice he could never forget, never forgive.

That was, if he accepted that Obi-Wan was dead. Which he could not. He could not give up until he had absolute proof. Several times he had tried to re-establish their Bond, but could get no sense of anything from his apprentice. Silence. Cold emptiness. Like his future.

"I must save my Padawan." There was no room for negotiation.

Mundi's voice was sad and compassionate and without understanding. "You must accept what you can not change, Master. Now go and find peace in meditation. I will inform the Council when we convene later in the morning. I am sure they will summon you for a full report."

Jaw clenched tightly against the anger and anguish that could not be subdued, Jinn bowed and left. Advised to go to their quarters to meditate, he refused to do that. Too many memories there, too much of his apprentice to haunt him.

Long, deliberate strides took him to the only possible place. In the hangar, Chief Xor's transport was being serviced -- a routine maintenance for all ships in the Jedi port. Wrapping himself in his robes he walked on board and waited the few minutes it took for the technicians to refuel and flight check the ship. All transports were kept in top condition at all times -- even visitor's ships. Quick exits from here were common. Within minutes the ship was ready. Calling to the maintenance bay on the communicator, Jinn announced

his flight plan. Receiving clearance from Coruscant control, he was quickly off the pad and into the atmosphere. He would be back at Xerilum before they knew he was gone. Then they would see if this cursed mission would cost the lives of one or two Jedi, or none at all.

---

In the last several years Obi-Wan had touched the Dark Side, fleetingly experiencing that rush of chill and horror as fellow Jedi died, as evil threatened. From where he stood -- laid -- now, Dark Magic and Dark Side felt pretty much alike.

Eyes open, he watched the shadowy wraith of Xxir messing with various incantations and flames. Other shadows milled around, all Dark. In the hours, days, he had been here, moments of blurred lucidity melded with dreamy sequences of unconsciousness. Thin trails of odorous material burned in hanging bowls. It was difficult to think or move. Xxir had managed some kind of energy drain, or spell, over him and it confused and annoyed him. How could a non-Force sensitive wield power over a Jedi? True, by his own volition he had tuned out the Force within, but there was no mistaking the powerful blow that had sent him into the wall with enough energy to knock him out. Since awakening in this claustrophobic chamber, Kenobi had seen no evidence of such talent -- had felt no tingle of Force, either Light or Dark, within Xxir. Then why was he unable to escape or think? Why could he not tear through the simple bindings on his arms and legs? The only good thing was the magic seemed to have dulled the pain from his wounds and that was at least something.

With no other mental avenues to explore, his mind automatically focused on the past, on memories. All recollections centered on his Master, alive and safely on Coruscant. No matter what happened next, Obi-Wan could die with honor, with an easy conscience, knowing he had saved his greatest friend.

"You think to cloud your mind, but I can peel it away layer by layer."

So Xxir had promised. Maybe that was what was happening. If so, it was a disturbing, but not painful or frightening process. The obscurity saved him from a panic, and he lived on the edge of Darkness, remembering the Light and unable to tap into it and use it to save himself. Was this Hell? A purgatory of his own making? To harbor his Master, Kenobi had denied the Force within him. To save his own life he could not summon it back. Was he to waste away to mental nothingness? At least he would not know. Soon perhaps even his thoughts would be gone. As long as Xxir didn't take away the memories.

Cloud my mind? Was he doing that? What did Xxir mean? Mentally he shifted to a comforting memory to clear the confusion. Qui-Gon standing before a ruling body on some planet -- he couldn't remember where or when. The Master eloquent, strong. Explaining the Jedi Code. No words were distinct, but he felt the Force, felt his Master's power.

" -- you hear me!" Xxir slapped him, the stinging pain knocking him back to reality. "You will tell me the secret of this Force! So far I can not see the power in it. Is it only temporary?"

When conscious, when Xxir was around, Obi-Wan was brutally questioned. So much for the old stand-by of not taking prisoners. Now that Xxir was the ruling Chief of the planet, thanks to Obi-Wan killing Xala, the magician must have changed policies. Lucky for Kenobi. Maybe. \_'And he never even thanked me,'\_ Kenobi sighed.

Another slap jolted the irony out of his thoughts.

"Why did the Force defeat Xala and not me? Will your Force make me more powerful?"

—

"What is your greatest imbalance, my dear Padawan?"

"My humility?"

Without a flick or a twitch, Jinn Force-sent a pillow flying at his pupil.

"My impatience and impulsiveness, Master?" "

—

The memory made him nearly giggle. "Shall I teach you to throw pillows?"

The crack earned him a blow strong enough to make his ears ring. He was fading back to null unconsciousness now. Why was this psycho asking him? Xxir used the Force to throw him against a wall and he hadn't been the same since! In the last moments of awareness, without thought, he slipped under the conscious mind to touch the faint, but steady power of the Force. Just as his Master had drilled him time and again. This was his own brand of magic. When all else failed he could lean on the strength and wisdom of his mentor, on their shared Bond.

Yes, he could feel his Master's breath, hear the whispering in his soul. No words, but the feeling was there. A powerful memory. The Warrior Bond. For an instant the breath caught in his throat. He was no longer alone. The Force had not deserted -- his Master -- had not deserted him! Clearly, into the deep, hidden recesses of his mind, the voice of his Master murmured his name.

----

No stranger to covert operations, Qui-Gon hovered in space for a short time, impatiently studying sensor read outs for the planet. Troops were massed around the palace and scattered over the immediate countryside. Closing his eyes he concentrated on the Force. He could use it now with no danger of being detected. At least he hoped. There was still the risk that Obi-Wan might open him up to detection if he received a telepathic message, but he hoped it would be an abstruse encouragement, not a hazard. And what of the Dark Force clinging to Xerilum? It was still there, but shrewdly different. Not as perilous? Not as powerful? Not as -- Dark? Could someone with Dark powers be manipulating the old magic here? Force sensitives sometimes turned to the Dark Side, especially if they were not found in time to be

brought in as Jedi trainees. Those were rarely very powerful against skilled and experienced Jedi working for the Light.

Whatever the case, this Dark domination had kept Obi Wan alive, for whatever purpose, but at least long enough for Qui-Gon to come and rescue him. Whatever the power, Jinn felt up to defeating it. He would simply not allow them to keep his Padawan away from him. The recognition gave him courage.

—

'Obi-Wan? I am here.'

—

A flicker of relief and joy touched his mind. A trembling sigh evidenced his satisfaction and his eyes burned with grateful tears. He didn't realize, until now, how certain he had been of Obi-Wan's death. Obi-Wan was alive! The underlying presence -- energy signature -- was still there. Their Warrior Bond was intact! Now all he had to do was rescue his Padawan from a hostile planet. Grinning, he felt anything was possible now.

---

Like many planets with rich natural resources, Xerilum depended on others for out-world services. The clan chiefs were too afraid of losing control of their populous, so education of the masses was minimal. Natives mostly worked the mines. Pilots and other skilled labor came from other sources -- greedy beings willing to work for the good wages. Xerilum natives then struggled just to survive. Leaving the luxuries and spoils to those in control.

It was no complicated feat, then, for Qui-Gon to land the ship undetected in a remote area not far from the palace. Nearly disk, he easily slipped through the thin city defenses to the outside of the palace. The pall of death and hatred still clung in the air, but little changed in the daily lives of these peasants no matter who resided in the palace and paid the soldiers, so the level of despair remained constant. What was gone was the sharply defined edge of Darkness he and Obi-Wan had sensed upon their arrival -- two days ago.

His Padawan had been in enemy hands for two days! Considering the savagery of the planet his blood chilled at the thought. Once more he strove for a reassuring communication, and once more he received the shallow sense that his Padawan was alive -- and that was all he could feel. That Dark Force from days ago was gone, replaced by an old and worn evil. Not the Dark Side. What that meant, he did not know, but it filled Jinn with renewed confidence. Maybe they really were dealing with old black magic now. Emboldened, he pushed at the Force limits, surging a message to his Padawan, pleading for a reply. Again, just the subtle whisper that Kenobi still lived.

A group of four, hooded figures walked from one of the out buildings toward the palace. There was no great sense of Darkness about them but a definite evil aura. The last one in the silent line was slow and hunched, probably old. Smiling to himself, Qui-Gon reminded himself gleefully that hidden secrets might intend to instill fear to the weak minded. Sometimes what was hidden could be turned against

those trying to hide.

----

A prodigious sneeze brought Obi-Wan to consciousness. His mind still felt insulated and muzzy, but quickly he felt the reassuring, still inner voice of his Master. Their bond was intact. No matter what happened that was a constant in his life.

Blinking, adjusting to the dim lighting, he realized a group of hooded figures surrounded him. He lay on a hard, cold stone table covered by a fine, smelly powder. It might have been funny in other circumstances, but after -- days? -- without nourishment, with some power still suppressing his mind, he found himself unable to resist the threat. The straps binding his arms and legs should have been no contest against his Force, but aside from the thin tendril of communication linked with Qui-Gon, the Force could not be summoned.

Xxir stood behind his head and touched his skull with cold fingers. "We know you have power and it is strong. You have held out against our potions and spells. The Dark One promised us your strength if we could but take it. This is the last misery. After this your essence and potency will be ours."

Several dozen robed figures filed into the room, all carrying bowls of burning liquid. As they circled his form they sprinkled acrid scented dust onto his chest and face. The sandy residue burned, especially the stinging, infected wounds on his arm and side. Until now he had mostly forgotten the pain and injuries. The awful powder was making every laceration, every hurt magnified, but still numbing his thoughts.

"There is no surviving this, Jedi. Your essence becomes mine and I will summon its power without the aggravating resistance of your body and stubborn mind!"

The frustrated warlock threw powder into Obi-Wan's face. Coughing, he tried to keep his inhalations to a minimum, tried not to panic as the powder absorbed the very air around him. The grit burned his skin and sent flashes of disorientation and swirling dizziness in his mind. With a desperate burst of the Force he tried to break the bonds. As with every other attempt to escape, he failed.

The hooded figures were still coming. Xxir, took a bowl, flames licking above the rim, and raised it over Kenobi's chest. This did not look good and Obi-Wan knew now was the time to reconnect with the Force. Calmly he recited several of his Master's most frequent quotes and centered himself. Instead of forcing his energy, he did as Qui-Gon tried to train him, slipping under the outward turmoil to the deepest center of his being. There he felt the comforting serenity of his Master. There he felt the Force build within. When he tried to bring that Force to the surface so he could fight back, it bounced back as if it had hit an invisible defensive shield.

The powder sprinkled on his body burned his skin. Hot, scalding liquid was dribbled on his chest and he lapsed back to his center. To the peace of Qui-Gon's spirit. Obi-Wan realized he was not getting out of this fix. The liquid reached his face. Part of his mind dismissed the distant pain. Another part dismissed the convulsions



ripping through his body. The greater part of his consciousness focused on the white, pure Bond that belonged to his Master. He hoped he was disciplined enough to keep the edges of pain and Darkness away. He only wanted Qui-Gon to know he had not given up. The foe had captured him, overpowered him, but he had never been defeated. Kenobi would not be a Padawan remembered as a failure, only, hopefully as an honor to his Master.

---

Strong projections of Obi-Wan's diminished energy filtered through his thoughts the deeper he went into the palace. Three floors below ground level, he grew closer to his Padawan with each step. Obi-Wan was alive and awake, but there was something terribly wrong.

When Qui-Gon stepped into the dark, basement room he blinked to adjust to the dimness, even as he moved he felt calm, but despair-edged thoughts from his Padawan. The Dark magic -- ancient evil -- was here in suffocating closeness. Stepping to the side of the other figures, he nearly gasped.

Obi-Wan was bound to a stone slab. Odorous potions and flaming oil was being poured onto the apprentice. Obi-Wan's thoughts, still with him, were completely shut off from the pain, even as the body convulsed in death-throes.

The assessment lasted only fractional seconds. Instinctively Qui-Gon drew and activated his sabre as he flew the flaming bowls to the ground with the Force. Pushing aside the figures he sliced through the straps holding his Padawan. Several of the robed beings moved toward him and he pushed or slashed them with the sabre as needed.

Jinn grabbed Obi-Wan under the shoulders and pulled him to his feet, but the young man's shuddering body collapsed to the floor. The man who had been pouring the scorching potion seemed to be in charge and Qui-Gon singled him out. Pressing the tip of the energy blade against the man's chest, Jinn demanded to know what had been done to his apprentice.

From out of nowhere the man threw some dust toward him, but the Force had warned him quickly enough that he pushed it away. Others threw potions or scalding liquid at him and he deflected it all, slowly burning a hole in his opponent's chest.

"Cure him! Reverse whatever you have done to him!"

"His power is mine!"

"And you will die if you do not free him from the spell. Then you will never be able to use his power."

Jinn pressed harder. The blade sizzled the man's clothes and he could smell burning flesh. In that instant he understood he could not trust the man with his friend's life. This fiend would do anything to keep his Black power. The warlock's hand twitched, as if to throw more dust, and Qui-Gon pushed home the blade, skewering his foe to the heart. When the fiend fell, a lightsabre hilt clanged to the floor, tumbling out of the thief's robes. Jinn called it into his hand and tucked it in his tunic.

Then swinging the lightsabre around he cut down three more who attacked him. Various dusts and liquids were thrown his way and he either avoided them or pushed them back to the attackers. Crossing back to Kenobi, he tried not to despair at the still, inert body that had ceased its torment, ceased breathing. Scooping the young man in his arms Qui-Gon fled with all speed, out of the room, out of the palace.

Running swiftly, Qui-Gon willed air into the clogged lungs of his Padawan. Using Force infused with desperation drove the dust from the lungs enough for Obi-Wan to cough, wheezing in at least enough air to stay alive. Once back at the ship Qui-Gon placed his apprentice in a chair and made haste to take off. He did not have time to concern himself with the hideous burns, with the raw scraping in the lungs, of the nearly non-existent Force strength. His Padawan was alive. That was all he had hoped for. Whatever complications followed they were better than the alternative.

As expected, there was no resistance, but Qui-Gon sighed with relief when they jumped to light speed and he put the ship on automatic controls. Going back to check on his pupil, he was dismayed at the pallor of the undamaged skin, the painful welts from the scalding potion, the infected blaster burns, the scraping breaths. Kneeling next to the chair he pushed away the anguish and focused on their link. First he would make contact, then move on to necessary healing trances or whatever was required.

Tenderly he brushed at the smooth skin around his Padawan's eyes. The bubbled flesh around the cheeks and nose would be agonizing once Obi-Wan regained consciousness. Right now Jinn would help him slip into a healing trance to numb the pain, then he would see to the physical injuries.

—  
\_'Obi-Wan.'\_ Taking a breath, he reached a more secure level of calm after much too long. His Padawan would be surprised how easily the Master could be rattled from the serene center of the Force. Not because he needed it to connect -- he didn't thanks to the Warrior Bond. Their link was still firm and undeniable. He needed the tranquility to ease the young man's anxieties. \_'Obi-Wan. Talk to me.'\_

— —  
\_'Master.'\_ Too faint.

—  
'Obi-Wan. My Padawan. Follow my voice. Come to me.'

—  
\_'I can't, my Master.'\_ Anguish -- an inner, wrenching torment that made Jinn cringe, his heart skipping a beat. \_'I can not come to you.'\_

— —

Controlling his own turbulent emotions, Jinn struggled to maintain composure. Gently he took hold of the limp hands in both of his. He needed to reassure his apprentice. Obi-Wan needed his strength now. \_'Tell me what is wrong.'\_

\_

'No --'

\_

\_ 'You must. You are so brave, my Padawan. What worries you now? You are safe, with me. I will let nothing harm you, I promise.'  
\_Hesitation. \_'Padawan --'\_

\_ \_

\_ 'Please, you must not say -- ' \_nearly a mental sob. \_'I no longer have the Force. I am no longer your Padawan. They have robbed my Force --'\_

\_ \_

Again, as so many times in the past, Jinn thanked his stars for their incredible, unique link. The choking misery he felt in his heart would not permit him to speak right now, and he was so gratified for the mental closeness with his apprentice. \_'My Padawan, you will always and ever be that in my heart. Even when you are old and gray and your white beard is down to your knees you will be my Padawan.'\_

\_ \_

The absurd image brought a lightness and shadow of the innate spark of humor from the younger man. \_'And we will trip over our beards together?\_' An inner grin flashed, then faded to regretful sadness, but not the despair of a moment ago. \_'I abandoned the Force, Master, and it will not come back. It is my fault. I --'\_

\_ \_

\_ 'Obi-Wan, Obi-Wan, no, that can't be.' \_Humbled and touched by this boy's incredible generosity and humility of spirit, Qui-Gon teetered on the brink of laughter and tears. \_'How can you be bereft of the Force and still have our connection? Our strength is underestimated because of our Bond. The magic and strength Force of the Bond overcomes the dark magic. Don't you understand? You might have sublimated the Force, but it can never leave you. Your heart is too pure, my Padawan.'\_

\_ \_

The confusion was clear. \_'I don't know, Master. Is our Warrior Bond something beyond the Force?' \_

\_ \_

\_ 'Yes,' \_Jinn assured in all seriousness. \_'Beyond any Force or any magic, my dear Padawan. But I assure you there is still Force within your spirit. The evil on Xerilum cloaked your ability to utilize your

talents, but they are still with you.' \_

—

'Thank you, Master.'

'I can't take the credit, my boy. It is your talent.'

'It is your faith -- your Bond that gave me the strength to hold on, Master. Once again you saved my life.'

—

Eyes burning, Jinn leaned his head next to his apprentice's. \_ 'As you have saved mine. As you have since we first met. As you do everyday.' \_

— —

The natural whimsy surfaced. \_ 'Are we to keep score then, Master?' \_

— —

The irony was matched with mirth mingled with poignancy. \_ 'Somehow I don't think we can count that high, my Padawan.' \_

— —

----

"Healers encouraged by his progress they are."

Qui-Gon turned from watching his slumbering Padawan's nearly healed features. With a nod he welcomed the small, green Jedi Master who shuffled close to the young apprentice.

"Safe he is now. Leave you could."

Jinn's large hand did not move from the boy's smaller, slender fingers. "He sleeps better when I'm here. The treatments have healed him physically, but his mind is still -- unsettled."

Never would he lie to the slight creature that was his Master, but he occasionally prevaricated. Nightmares plagued the boy since their return to Coruscant two days earlier. The scars from the burns were nearly gone, but regaining his Force-energy had been a struggle not yet conquered. The "magic" potions seemed to have damaged Obi-Wan's Force levels and the Healers were puzzled to explain it. More distressing, they were at a loss to correct the malady and Jinn refused to leave the youth's side for more than short spaces of time. The dread of the lingering damage was agonizing and aggravating. The confusion and illness left his Padawan weak and internally scared. It left Jinn scared -- of the now -- of the future. Already the Healers were talking in the long-term if they could not cure the youth and Jinn refused to think about that. He was far from relinquishing the battle. He had abandoned his Padawan once, he would never do so again.

Currently Qui-Gon was in an intense debate with the lead Healer.

Feeling closer than anyone to his apprentice, Jinn felt he could heal the boy's mental wounds faster than strangers could. Always he fell short of explaining about their Warrior Bond and relied on the well-known cliché that the link between Master and Padawan was deep and profound. Fighting against medical establishment was not easy and so Jinn remained at Obi-Wan's side, subtly keeping in touch with his friend as he tried to push along the silent recovery. But even he could not fathom or defeat the strange cloud of obscurity which seemed to shroud his Padawan's mind.

Kenobi rarely surfaced to consciousness. The combination of the mental and physical ordeals -- the suffering and healings -- had worn him out and his body and mind demanded almost constant rest. Yet another reason Jinn was so grateful for their Bond. They could communicate nearly as easily in silent mode as in speaking. In fact, now that they were harassed and crowded by Healers and Council members, Jinn preferred the link-messages. Today, Jinn's argument had focused on letting Obi-Wan be returned to their quarters where he felt the boy would feel more at ease than in the healing station. So far he had not won that round either.

"Missing my message are you." Yoda's gravelly voice sounded impatient, irritated. "The Council requested your presence long ago."

Jinn had forgotten, but even he admitted it was a convenient, probably selective omission. "My apologies, Master."

"Much you have to answer for, Master Jinn."

Unable to deny that loaded statement, in all its implications for the Council, for Obi-Wan, the Human bowed his head. "I know. What has the Council decided?"

"Hear your side again we will. And the Padawan's."

Instinctively Qui-Gon wanted to protect his apprentice from the rigors of a Council hearing. Qui-Gon was in trouble, which was not unusual. No need to drag his Padawan into the fray.

"I shall come when summoned, Master, I promise."

Yoda nodded. "Avoidance does not help you, hmmm. Many disturbed by your -- devotion to each other. Your -- bond."

Scrutinizing the little Master, Qui-Gon wondered what that veiled comment might mean. Only Yoda had ever hinted that he could believe in a Warrior Bond, and that he could consider it established between Jinn and Kenobi. Long ago he and his Padawan had agreed to keep it their secret because such a Bond could jeopardize their standing within the Jedi society. There would be those who would feel threatened by the link. Others would feel it a threat to the overall dedication of Jedi selflessness. Every Master and Padawan should be committed to safeguard each other, but numerous times it had been suggested Jinn and his apprentice went too far in that personal loyalty.

With a chill in his heart, Jinn was suddenly wary about his interview with the Council. What was Yoda hinting at? Reprimands? He was used to those. As long as they did not extend to his apprentice he could

handle that. Could the Council be thinking of something more drastic?

Now dreading the authority ruling their lives, he dropped all pretenses. "What are you saying?"

"Mentioned I have not myths about a Bond. Others question your dedication to your Padawan. Too much alike you are. No longer amusing to the Council that is."

Jinn released his hold on Obi-Wan, lest the young man sense the cold fear tingling around his heart. "He is my responsibility. He is still only a boy. I will do any --it is my duty to protect him."

Yoda's slight eyes narrowed. "Even release him from your care, would you?"

Gasping for air, the breath suddenly knocked out of him as if from a blow, Jinn stared at the Master. "You would take him from me? Why? Because he's important to me?" Jinn launched from the chair and paced to the far side of the small, spare room.

"Too important. Break the rules you sometimes do. When you deem it right you do. Dissident you do when protecting the apprentice. Teach the boy this bad habit you have. Both think you are above the Code."

Impassioned, desolate, Jinn used his most compelling gifts of persuasion. From his heart he assured the old Master that Obi-Wan and he followed the Force, the Code, even from the first day they met. Since then they had learned to work as a team within that Force, learned to love and trust each other in an effective, fulfilling mode. They were far more effectual together, even with their faults, than they would be separately. The link, the Bond, the affection they had formed could not be denied, but how could such good, strong qualities be a liability in a system built upon service and dedication to others? How could the Council consider separating them? At eighteen, it would be unheard of for Obi-Wan to gain another Master. And he was far from ready for his trials. Besides, replacing or suspending a Master was -- unthinkable.

Yoda's lip curled. "Eloquent as always, Master Jinn, you are. Hmmm. Before the Council still must you go."

A weak gurgle interrupted. "Then I must go, too," Obi-Wan whispered.

Wanting to go to his Padawan's side, Qui-Gon resisted the open and instinctive show of affection and settled for a sad smile at his charge.

"Heal you must," Yoda corrected.

Too tired to sit up, Kenobi rolled over on his side to face the others. "I killed the ruler of a planet, Master Yoda. I relinquished the Force. You must --"

"We are not here to recount your actions, Padawan." Jinn's voice was stern and sharp. "When the Council is ready to hear from you they will inform you. Now sleep. Yoda and I will continue this discussion

later."

Obi-Wan stared at the old, small Master. "If my Master is censured then I must be too, Master Yoda. I don't know why -- what you think he's done wrong, but whatever it is, Master Qui-Gon acted on what he believed to be right. He is the most pure of heart I have ever known."

Grimacing, Qui-Gon gave a curt shake of his head to forestall anymore misguided praise in his direction. This was not helping their cause. Inscrutable, Yoda merely nodded and ordered the apprentice to sleep. Discussion and Council sessions were far in his future. His rough voice dropping with compassion, he offered a quick wink.

"Heal, young Kenobi, you must. Worry you do not need. Know I the Force directed you into questionable care of this renegade Master. Believe in myths still I do."

Qui-Gon released a huge sigh, which received raised eyebrows from the other two Jedi. Yoda shuffled away. Jinn knelt down beside the bed and gave his apprentice a smile. "I think we just got the most important seal of approval."

"What did you do this time, Master?" The young voice long-suffering and gently chiding. "You're in trouble again!"

Chuckling, Jinn shook his head. "Your lot in life, my Padawan. You must deal with the rebel of the Order." He patted his apprentice's shoulder. "I'll explain it all after you're well enough to sit up and listen for more than a few minutes. Don't worry. We've gotten out of worse than this."

Without much resistance Kenobi closed his eyes and quickly drifted back to an unconsciousness that was more than a sleep and less than restful. Touching his apprentice's shoulder, Jinn closed his eyes, sending calm and rest to his Padawan. Filtered within those thoughts, were his doubts and he withdrew before the dreadful concern that shadowed his mind reached his boy. The Council, the future mattered little if his Padawan was not restored to health again. Already the Healers were despairing, speculating on Kenobi's overall health should the Force not be fully restored to the young Jedi. Jinn refused to acknowledge the possibility. They had come so far -- too far to lose their partnership now.

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\*\*\_

'Dark. Blindness. Smothering.'

\_\*\*

Jinn jolted awake, instantly knowing there was something wrong with his apprentice before he opened his eyes. In the narrow bed in the healing chambers, Kenobi's sweat-drenched body trembled. Nightmare. Qui-Gon gripped onto the thin, damp arm. The disturbance intensified. Jolting the young man, Jinn's distress deepened when he could not waken the ill youth. There was something deeply wrong.

"Obi-Wan!" The sharp command did not break into the fevered grip of

dread where the youth's mind was trapped. "Obi-Wan!" Jinn released his hand, realizing his tight grip and physical shaking were doing nothing more than bruising his apprentice.

—  
\_ 'Padawan, hear me!' \_ Driven by anxiety, his demand was not acknowledged. In the tormented, afflicted mind he could find no responding contact or reference points. Confusion and distress ruled the mental planes\_. 'Padawan! Attend!' \_ Even the strident near-rebuke gained nothing.

Taking a deep breath he knelt beside the bed and placed a palm against Kenobi's right temple. Overpowering the distortion with calm and firm energy, Jinn's overwhelming mental tide swept through his apprentice's mind. There had been no need to intrude this deeply into Obi-Wan's mental privacy for years. Since their early years there had not been blocks between them.

Perplexed, Jinn now realized he should have done this as soon as he knew Obi-Wan was Force-blocked. Jinn had been fooled by the ease of their usual connection, thinking that if the Warrior Bond was intact, he automatically knew the depths of his Padawan's mind. Not so, he realized with a cringe. The Bond between them was, as he should have remembered, beyond any avenues of normal and known Force relations. And now, with a shadow of dread, he was realizing the block around Kenobi's mind was also something beyond their comprehension.

—  
\_ 'Obi-Wan!' \_ Find the core of his Padawan. Seek out the center of their link, the pacific and profound home of which they were unified. \_ 'Obi-Wan!' \_ He tried to remain calm, urgency lent focus to his demand. \_ 'My Padawan!' \_

— —  
\_ 'Master.' \_ It was a tentative inner hush, but it was there. \_ 'Master I can't find you. Where are you?' \_

— —  
Fleeting, wisping images danced through Jinn's thoughts with breathless speed. Dark, foreboding impressions; the red emotions of fear and abandonment, the blackness of evil.

The plaintive abandonment, the reminder of his duty-forced betrayal nearly broke his heart. Jinn pushed aside the cutting guilt and concentrated on saving his apprentice. \_ 'I am here. Where I shall always be.' \_

— —  
More swirls of mental confusion. \_ 'Adrift. Shame.' \_

— —  
\_ 'Come to me, Obi-Wan.' \_ Silence. On another level Jinn was aware his Padawan's body was still trembling, still soaked in sweat\_. 'Answer



me, Padawan. Let me help you, please.'\_

--

The lurking thoughts were guarded, afraid. \_'I have failed you, Master. How can you want to help me?'

--

The noble heart of the wise and galaxy-weary Jedi cracked. \_'Because I love you, my son. Believe me when I say you have not -- ever -- failed me.'

--

\_'The Dark evil, Master. It overpowered me.'\_ The raven flit of something wisped through their link. \_'I was not strong enough.'

--

'Obi-Wan, what was that? The dark, feathery image?'

'The hooded mystery man.'

--

He said it with such forthrightness Jinn blinked\_. 'Who?'

--

'A man who directed Xxir. Xxir and his little cronies followed this hooded man like sheep --'

--

A violent shiver ran the course of his system, inside and out, and the mental kick jolted Jinn. Pure Dark Force. Like a sharp, ebony stiletto right into the center of his brain and heart. The impact nearly broke their mental and physical connection, but Jinn held on -- barely -- slowly regaining ground, gradually reconnecting the mental bridge between them.

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\_'Obi-Wan.'\_ Too tentative. Too fearful. His apprentice was not responding. That flash of malfeasance scared the youth. \_'Obi-Wan.'\_ Gentle patience was required. His thoughts filled with soothing peace\_. 'I can help you now, my Padawan. I know what this is. I have never been so close -- but I know. WE can fight this together, my son. Do not be afraid.'

--

\_'I am not afraid, Master.'\_ Instant, adamant denial.

The refute made the older man smile. \_'Of course not. As you should not be. Obi-Wan, someone of great depravity and Dark Power has infiltrated your mind.'\_ At the rising panic Jinn rephrased instantly. \_'Calm, Padawan, this is serious, but not fatal, and not

insurmountable. Now that we know what we are dealing with we can fight it.' \_ He felt the encouragement, still too tentative to put into words, but his apprentice was with him\_. 'A Dark-Force shield has insulated your mind. We allowed the magician's tricks -- the mystic combination of the potions and ceremonies to cloud our judgement. I am very sorry, Obi-Wan. I should have seen this much sooner.' \_

--

As always, compassion for others -- for his Master -- drew the boy out. \_'How could you, Master? I didn't remember the hooded man until your mind reached through the confusion.' \_

--

Qui-Gon shivered\_. 'It is a formidable and evil Darkness, my Padawan. I shall need to go very deep into your mind to extricate this Wickedness. I have only touched the edges of the darkness and it is anchored intricately in your mental shields.' \_

--

The bravery and maturity was clear through the link. \_'Is there danger? I will not do it if it will hurt you.' \_

--

\_ 'No. Our Bond makes this easy. We have visited each other's core essence before.' \_ He flinched, imagining the brutal Dark Force, which had intruded on his apprentice's mind so deep, ripping apart intimate shields to coat Obi-Wan's thoughts and will with Darkness. \_ 'Do you trust me to do this?' \_ He would not allow it to last any longer.

A long-suffering sigh. \_ 'Of course, Master. My life is always in your hands.' \_

--

Without volition Qui-Gon's thumb gently rubbed the youth's forehead. There was no acknowledgement of the humorous lilt of the wry thoughts. Forcing down the instinctive guilt he offered a subdued vow. \_ 'I will be a better Master in the future.' \_

--

'I could not ask for better now.'

--

Jinn's right hand trembled as he placed it on the scarred chest, his left hand remaining on the boy's temple. Unsure if he was emotionally ready for this, Qui-Gon knew he needed to act immediately. The mental confusion and disorientation had to be stopped, the disintegration of his Padawan must end so he could regain his Force and life. So they could both regain their lives.

Gradually, but determinedly, Jinn forged a mental shield of Light, mentally pushing through the distortion and grayness in Obi-Wan's mind. Quickly the journey became convoluted, twisted, and Dark.

Ignoring the pressing dimness and the cloying, smothering Black, Qui-Gon disintegrated the evil particles, dispersing them, dissolving them under the barrage of Light and righteousness. Slowly, hesitantly at first, he felt Obi-Wan's strength return, the young man's Force joining naturally in their comfortable Bond, weaving together a mental armor of vibrancy, brightness and love. Then the Dark and evil were gone, vanquished in the blink of an eye. The trapped Force within Kenobi glittered, matching Jinn's resplendent Force. The Warrior Bond was not only intact, but seemed stronger, more indestructible and solid than ever.

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Jinn had again been summoned to appear before the Council. This time Yoda came personally to escort the recalcitrant Master to the proceedings. The Healers complained to the small green creature, distressed at Jinn's unconventional insistence on camping out in the Healing Quarters, at Jinn's protectiveness of the patient, of the Master's refusal to leave. Yoda listened with silence,, nodding in sympathy.

When they reached Kenobi's room the Healer's were affronted that Jinn's head rested on his Padawan's chest. Both seemed to be in a deep sleep. Yoda frowned, closed his eyes, then a smile slowly spread on his wrinkled visage.

"Let them rest you will. Crisis is over. Obi-Wan is returned to the Force."

Exchanging whispered murmurs, the Healers tested the observation and also felt the familiar pattern of Force from Kenobi. Jinn's Force signature also seemed normal. Both were simply exhausted. Clearly they did not understand. Yoda advised them to wait until Jinn recovered, he was sure to give them a full explanation.

"Contact me when Jinn awakens." Yoda turned and left, a wistful smile playing on his lips. \_'Believe in magic I sometimes do,'\_ he admitted to himself\_. 'Believe in Warrior Bonds it seems I must.'\_ The thought was a happy one.

When Jinn awoke later he was stiff and worn physically, but pleased to sense his apprentice in a deep and dreamless healing sleep. Stretching out in a nearby chair, Qui-Gon watched the slumbering youth for a short while before leaving to sleep in his own quarters for a change.

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"Of the charges, what say you, Master Qui-Gon Jinn?"

Just his luck to get Mundi as the officiator in this inquiry. Jinn didn't dare flick a glance at Yoda, but he would bet the little green Master had arranged this dramatic presentation for maximum affect. Mundi was displeased with Qui-Gon's blatant disobedience. Several of the other Council members were, too, he could feel their disapproval and irritation ringing the circular room.

Stealing a ship, leaving Coruscant airspace without a permit, disobeying a direct order from a Council member. Did they leave anything out? Jinn was afraid to ask. Choosing the easy items first,

he humbly and readily admitted to leaving the airspace without a permit, but he was in a hurry. Stealing a ship -- well, technically the ship belonged to Chief Xor, who was no longer Chief, so it seemed a vehicle up for grabs. Disregarding the orders of a Councilman, yes, he had ignored Mundi's **\*\*\_advice\_\*\***, but only to save the life of his apprentice.

This started a debate, first voiced by Mace Windu, the seemingly most stringent member of the Council. Fleetinglly, Jinn knew he could have had that seat in this room instead of Windu, but his dubious past prevented him from such an exalted honor. At this rate he would never qualify. The thought warmed him with contentment for a brief instant.

"Your devotion to your Padawan is reckless."

There, Mundi voiced it clearly and plainly, the crux of the current ill feelings toward Jinn's latest misadventures. Now they had a label -- a scapegoat for the rebellion. Always a maverick, Jinn's insurrectionist tendencies now had a form and an appellation for the blame. Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"His life was in danger."

"Which you did not know for a certainty! He could have been dead."

"I would have known."

"You think you would have known." This correction from Windu. Should Jinn acknowledge the fault, the flaw in his logic? Is that the kind of relationship Windu had with his apprentice, Depa Billaba, who was the newest member on the Council? Master and Padawan both on the Council! The thought boggled his mind at the amusing possibilities and he seriously doubted he or Kenobi would ever enjoy such an astounding possibility. "A Master and Padawan connection is strong, but not the end-all of a Jedi's Code."

Jinn glanced at Yoda, wondering if the old Master would betray the secret of the Warrior Bond. With the current mood of the Council the knowledge -- the suspicion that an old myth had been attained -- Jinn was leery of being completely honest. Would they reject and denounce the Bond? Would they study it? Would they embrace it as a possible future for strength and hope in an increasingly dangerous and precarious galaxy for Jedi? With the current objections bouncing around the room, Jinn did not want to take the risk. He would rely on the old platitudes and his skill in persuasion.

"The life of an apprentice is the responsibility of a Master. It has ever been. I completed my mission of bringing Xor and Senator Valorum safely back to Coruscant. Duty fulfilled, it was my obligation then to see to my Padawan."

"You unnecessarily risked your life in the questionable rescue of one you could not be sure was alive."

Emotional, intimate reasons crowded his mind. The accountability, the loyalty, the love, the Bond were his reasons. Compared to them his life meant very little. At the loss of his Padawan, his life would be so diminished he could not fathom the emptiness.

"Nevertheless, I had to try," was the subdued and honest reply. "I know the Council is disturbed by my breach of protocol and my lack of respect for Councilman Mundi's authority. For that I apologize. For the obligation to my Padawan I do not apologize."

"Some of us feel," Mace Windu intoned, "That your sense of duty to your apprentice exceeds the bounds of reason. Is your devotion to the youth clouding your judgement enough to affect your duties to the Order?"

Before he could respond the tall, huge doors of the chamber opened. The shuffling, slow figure of Apprentice Kenobi entering the room brought murmurs of surprise to the group. Jinn stood his ground, stilling the impulse to help his Padawan. The boy could hardly walk due to weakness. His face still marked red with scars from his ordeal, while the rest of the face was wan above the sand colored tunic. The eyes, however, showed a resolute, stubborn determination that glittered a greeting to his Master.

Gritting his teeth at the deliberate, painstaking steps, Jinn folded his arms in the wide sleeves of his tunic and waited with strained patience as the young man joined him in the center circle. During a discussion of their precariously close relationship and tendencies to rebellion, this was the worst possible timing from his apprentice.

"Masters, Council members, I beg your forgiveness at the intrusion." Obi-Wan's deep voice was unsteady, he labored to draw himself up straight in formal address. "I ask to be heard in this matter since it concerns events that I have put in motion."

The subdued humility, the wounded and obviously painful endurance softened even the hardest hearts with compassion. It helped to remind Jinn that the Council was not the enemy. They were in opposition. They were threatening his very existence, but they were not enemies, neither were they unbeatable."

Yoda was quick to respond. "Hear you we will, Apprentice Kenobi." Pride and admiration briefly coursed the wrinkled features of the little Master. He sent a glimpse of this to Jinn.

Qui-Gon was grateful for the silent support and honor extended to his brave Padawan.

With a voice not yet strong, Obi-Wan recounted the events of the battle on Xerilum. He admitted what he considered failure to fight hard enough against Dark Force and magic. He accepted responsibility, as an apprentice, to being the reason for his Master's rebellion. Qui-Gon Jinn was known as an honorable and wise Master and could not be expected to dishonor his integrity by abandoning a weak and inadequate apprentice.

Jinn wanted to argue the points, but instinctively refrained, allowing the poignant argument to settle on the Council. He could feel the surprise, respect, and even sympathy. The pure instincts of the faithful youth struck a responsive chord with the authoritative beings. The virtuous, almost pathetic defense of his Master was touching to all who were weary of the rebellion of the elder Jedi, but stirred by the valiance of the young. As it did so often, his

future, his partnership, his life was in the proficient hands of the one he trusted most.

"Take your words into consideration will we," Yoda promised. "You are now dismissed Apprentice Kenobi."

With a slight bow the youth shuffled off, never once looking at Jinn. Just before he reached the door, Yoda called him to a halt and he painfully turned.

"In future, Padawan, wait you will for Council to summon you." The rebuke was gentle, even amused. "Enough we have to do without surprise, headstrong guests. Hmmm."

"Yes, Master Yoda."

After the doors closed behind Obi-Wan, Yoda leveled his gaze at Jinn. The preliminaries were over. Qui-Gon held his breath.

"Impressed we are at the chivalry of young Kenobi. Good training you have given him. Stubbornness and willful independence more he needed not. So he has learned the good and bad. Some question your loyalty to him and his devotion to you. Such headstrong emotions lead to disobedience and rebellion."

Jinn was about to protest but sensed it was not in his best interest to interrupt. The tone of the reprimand was not going in a good direction. While the anxiety was real, he had to fall back on his own lessons of patience. Yoda liked Kenobi and personally acknowledged the Warrior Bond, at least in theory, between Master and Padawan. If the Council voted disillusion of the team, he would fight with all his heart and soul. At the very edge of a dark precipice, he knew he had not reached the desperation point yet.

"Nevertheless, the Force was not wrong. Belong together you do with Kenobi. Taught much you both have. Learned you have both. Not all lessons good they have been. Watch you we will. Advise you to temper your affection and commitment with caution. Jedi Code of service must come before Jedi -- even Padawans. Understand this, Master Qui-Gon Jinn?"

"I understand, Master Yoda." The sincere, humble acquiescence was quick. He had just been given the greatest reprieve of his life and he was not going to do anything to damage the good will. No sense of insubordination was worth the risk of losing Obi-Wan as his Padawan. "Thank you."

"You are dismissed. When Apprentice Kenobi's health is improved, meet with him we will."

"Yes, Master."

In the corridor next to the lifts, Qui-Gon was not surprised to see a slouching figure leaning against the wall. Resisting the urge to carry the weak boy back to the Healer's Quarters, Jinn stood close, allowing subtle waves of the Force to offer support.

"I think you need to get some rest."

"May I return home, Master? I would feel much better."

Jinn was not about to refuse him much of anything, and certainly not the comfort of their hospitable quarters. "Of course." They walked to the lift at a slow gait. "Thank you, Obi-Wan. Your rash, impulsive risk was reckless. But I think you saved me once again."

For the first time Obi-Wan looked directly at his Master, relief and joy sparkling the green eyes. "I am happy to hear that, Master." He sobered. "It was a near thing, I take it."

The lift took them to the level of their assigned cabin. Jinn studied the weary face that seemed better now that so much anxiety was behind them. "How did you know?"

A crooked grin quirked at Kenobi's lips. "The medical rooms are a notorious place to pick up gossip, Master, didn't you know that? Especially when the Healers assume you're sick and too feeble to understand what they're speculating about."

Jinn chuckled, filled with relief and the simple happiness that he would have more years to appreciate this pawky, loyal youth.

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Three days later Master and Padawan were summoned to a hasty interview with part of the Council. Only five members were present, some unspecified crisis taking the others away. The first matter of business was Kenobi's confession of his actions on the planet Xerilum. Summarily the concerns about his killing of the clan leader Xala were dismissed. Acting to protect a Senator and one who the Jedi was to represent -- Xor -- Kenobi had acted appropriately. Of his lack of resistance against the Dark Side, it was concluded that Obi-Wan never surrendered, but was just not powerful enough to counter a much more potent Force.

They had encountered Dark Powers before [Jedi Warrior Bond #2&3], but this was the most personal and engulfing threat to Kenobi. The youth asked if it was a phenomenon growing more frequent -- if more Jedi were overwhelmed by the Darkness. Not surrendering to the Dark Side, but being overtaken by the evil Force.

Yoda only speculated that he believed the incidents were increasing, but could not prove it. Then he stared at them both, gravely stating his displeasure at their reckless capacity for sacrifice for each other.

"What do you intend to do, Master?" Jinn's voice was flat, his expression tightly closed.

Obi-Wan held his breath.

Yoda studied the youth. "Much you have still to learn, young apprentice. Years you have under a mostly wise and skilled Master. More years you need before you will be ready for your trials as Knight. Learn well you must, time is precious and passes quickly."

Kenobi darted a glance at his Master. Both were pleased and subdued with the praise and the reminder that even their extraordinary

internship was temporary.

Yoda was concerned with the Dark Force hooded man on Xerilum. The Dark power, which constrained Kenobi's mind was a grave, threat to Jedi sovereignty. More and more attacks -- some fatal -- had been perpetrated against the Order dedicated to peace and balance. Yoda considered options for a defense against the unseen and unknown but potent Dark Forces acting against them.

"Wary all Jedi must remain." He stared at the two in the center circle. "Cautious you Master Jinn and you Padawan Kenobi must be. Your bond is powerful, an asset to you both. A weakness it can be. A vulnerability to enemies. Guarded you must be." The intense stare emphasized there was more warning than just the surface words. His voice dropped to a near whisper. "No extraordinary bonds there must be. A danger they can prove."

With a nod he dismissed them. In silence they walked to their cabin on a level of the Temple reserved for Masters and their Padawans. Although they were away from the Temple more than they were in residence, the sense of permanence of stable quarters helped create a feeling of home. Because of Kenobi's recuperation period they remained longer than usual. By mutual consent they digested the warnings, pondering the advice for future discussion.

---

Recuperation took precedence over physical training so Obi-Wan's recovery was tediously slow for the impatient teen. On the apprentice's eighteenth birthday Qui-Gon treated to an excursion into the city. Material possessions were not common for Jedi, and Qui-Gon was more spartan than most, so presents -- tangible gifts or curios were never exchanged between them. In festive observance a night of rare foods and fun entertainment kept them out far later than Jinn wanted, but he was reluctant to end the long day. The age celebration made more of a mark than he expected. It seemed a poignant time of change, of his apprentice growing up in stature and independence.

They returned to their quarters tired, Obi-Wan worn, but the youth insisted on settling on the sofa, unwilling for the glorious day and night to end. Silently they watched the busy night traffic of Coruscant out their small view port.

"Thank you, Master. It is a birthday I will always remember."

The comment broke Jinn out of a reverie and he smiled. "As will I, Padawan," he admitted with pleasure. Almost instantly his face sobered. "What do you think about Yoda's counsel of our Bond?"

They had not spoken of the interview, but had sensed in each other a guarded interest in doing so. "He was talking about not just obvious enemies, but those who would seek to separate us from within the Council, wasn't he?"

"I believe so."

"It would kill him to just come out and say so instead of being so cryptic?"



The sarcasm brought a smile to Jinn's serious countenance. Since the lecture they shared the warm, comfortable connection, but had been physically restrained, reverting to the outwardly aloof and cool Jedi façade they often used on missions. Instinctively both had retained a kind of respectful distance, but the solid connection of the Bond had not diminished.

"I believe we must maintain a pretense of accepting their advice if we are to retain our partnership."

The young man's face soured. "Pretend there is no special connection." Obi-Wan was seriously honest. "I can not promise you restrain in all conditions, Master. If given the choice, you know I would choose your safety over anything or anyone. I can not deny that."

Not surprised, Jinn quietly agreed. "I understand, my Padawan. I must admit to the same weakness myself." Coming to his feet, Jinn stood at the port and slowly nodded. "For all appearances we will show that there is emotional distance. That we have heeded the Council's warnings. Only you and I will subliminally know the difference. Our Bond will never abate."

Obi-Wan joined the Master and Qui-Gon looked at their reflections in the port. Side by side. No force in the galaxy could change that. Distance could separate them temporarily, but their Warrior Bond exceeded the known boundaries of conventional thought on the Force. Perhaps this incredible connection would not decrease even in death, but he did not want to speculate to those dreadful possibilities. It was enough now to revel in the strength of what they possessed.

"I have not given you your present yet, my Padawan."

The reflected Obi-Wan blinked. "What of the magnificent entertainment?" He grinned wickedly. "If only I had a holo vid of that dancer --"

Jinn cleared his throat. "And I'm glad you don't." Turning, he placed a hand on the lower, slighter shoulder. "This has been a special time for us. All too soon we will leave on a mission and adjust to our studied distance."

For Jinn, the outward appearance of cool detachment, even regal disdain was intimidatingly easy to project. It would be harder if not for their Bond, but the undercurrent of their link was ever present and a constant comfort. They could handle anything, he believed, as long as that was intact.

"I want to give you a special present." He turned back to observe their reflections in the port. Touching his fingertips onto Obi-Wan's temple he imprinted a memory of the moment, a stamp of the image burned into their minds. "We are reflections of each other, my Padawan. Always together. Whatever reality lays beyond, this image will hold true in our minds, in our hearts."

In Jinn's mind he received a flash of an impression from his apprentice. The memory of an old drawing in a book, from the Temple archives. The book relating the myth of the Warrior Bond. The sketch showed a Master and Padawan, fighting side by side. As he and his

Padawan often did and always would. He had the contented sense of history not being repeated, but being extended. Forever.

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THE END

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End  
file.